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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

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L I N C O L N

By

William Lowe Bryan

The best speech about Lincoln is in your memory. If those of you who are old enough should stand and speak one after another we might have the story of his life in personal remembrances. Some of you have seen him; have heard his voice and touched his hand; and many of you feel that in a deeper sense you knew and shared his life. Some of you were born in a cabin. Some of you helped to cut a way out of the wilderness with an axe. Some of you have studied by the winter firelight, and so, when he first rose among you with a treasury of those firelights in his heart, you knew him for a brother. You lived with him here in the days before the war. For twenty fierce years, whose stake was not money but national unity and human right, you were at his side. You marshalled about him for battle with a fire in your heart that was hotter than the flame of cannon. You marched with him into the valley of death. What you saw there, how should we children know? We only know that in the end you stood about him bearing still aloft the flag,—riddled and scorched and stained,—never before so whole and so clean. For a moment you stood about him and then he was taken away.

He was the child of the people. His only college was fellowship with them. The book he studied most was their life. God gave him power to read it deep. He saw there what any one may see — the rough coat, the uncouth speech, the husk of selfishness. He knew as well as any one the wolf that is in us all, and how

sometimes we hunt together in packs, and how sometimes we tear each other to pieces over the carcass. He knew as well as any one how we hunger and thirst and sneak and barter our lives away for little messes of pottage. It was part of his genius to see these things better than the crafty little people who see nothing else, and to know better than they how to turn them to account.

He was like one standing upon the seashore. He saw all the troubled and contending waves of ignorance and greed and passion. But deeper than all surface waves and storms, tranquil and deep, he saw the great gulf stream of life that bears resistless toward the Better for evermore. A child can see the wave. It takes a philosopher to see the ocean current. It takes a greater man — a man we scarce see twice in a thousand years — it takes a statesman to see both, to use both, to make every fleeting wave and every capricious wind and all the tempestuous conflict of superficial forces add all their little strengths to that of the deep undercurrent. We love the child. We honor the philosopher. We follow the statesman. Lincoln was all three.

Because he knew the people's life so well, because he saw so far across its surface, so deep into its underflow, he was a democrat. "Everybody knows more than anybody." "You can fool all of the people part of the time and you can fool part of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." "The people will wobble right," he said. That is democracy. It does not mean the banishment of the wise. It means that none are wise to rule but those who know from within the better mind of the people. It does not mean that we have no need of strong and sagacious leader-

ship. It means that none are strong and none are sagacious but those who stand like the engineer at his throttle allied with a power greater than their own, — allied with that power which in the people and through the people works for righteousness for evermore. It does not mean government by a mob. It means government by men at their best, at the fireside, at the wifeseide, looking into the face of God.


Lincoln was such a democrat, and because he was so, he was and is himself the best defense and plea for a government of the people.

Mr. Lowell has said that the final defense of democracy is whether it can produce the best men. It is good that we have so many square miles of government, so many cities and mills, so vast a roar of industry and trade announcing always new freedoms from the earth. But all these were miserable defense for a government of the people unless we could show an always nobler people. Athens, Florence, Jerusalem, -- all of them could be lost in a Texas county, — but they have filled the world with light because of their men. Whom have we to show? Have we any man who, in Whitman's phrase, "can walk unashamed with Kings *** walking with even pace with Kings the world's round promenade." To me it seems we have one. It was not given him to put the life of people into song. It was not given him to build a temple and show the people a vision of their faith in stone. God gave him a diviner task. He helped the people see their own best and put it into deed. He called for their best and the soul of the people, half smothered by the lust for money, bewitched by the sorceries of slavery, the soul of the people sprang forth like an archangel to achieve the splendor of a nation purified and a race made free.

And the people loved him. They knew he had faults. But he was so near to everybody. He never grew so great as to become a stranger. Even at the last, when all the heats of life, the gentle and the terrible, had brought forth in him an all conquering charity, even at the last as he was gathered up out of their sight, the people felt that he was not far from any one of them.

And the world loves him. A few years ago I was present in Chicago at the first meeting of the World's Parliament of Religions. Leaders of the faiths of eight hundred millions of people were there. In the opening address great leaders of the past were remembered, — Paul, Luther, Lessing, and many more. Presently a name was heard, and that vast strange audience, such as no man in the world ever saw before, burst into a sea of applause that rose and rose again and would not die. It was Lincoln. And there were those who were shaken with sobs to see how he who was our neighbor, our chief, our father, has become for the people of every race a saint.

William Fourn Bryan.



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